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AUTHOR	Garner, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

The quarterly theme-based publication "Focus on Basics" was launched in January 1997 as part of a multipronged effort by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy to connect research and practice in the field of adult basic education (ABE). The effectiveness of "Focus on Basics" as a means of professional development was evaluated through a telephone survey of its subscribers. Of the 112 subscribers called, 60 were contacted and 49 participated in the survey. The respondents included 12 teachers, 13 staff developers, and 24 program directors. Ten teachers, 12 staff developers, and 20 administrators shared "Focus on Basics" with their colleagues. All 12 teachers and 16 program administrators reported that reading "Focus on Basics" prompted them to reflect on their practice. "Focus on Basics" was also credited with inspiring six teachers to alter their practice, three teachers to make changes in their program's design, and three staff developers to alter their staff development activities. Seven teachers stated that "Focus on Basics" served as an impetus for seeking new resources, 11 said that it increased their appreciation of research, and all but 1 respondent stated that it made them feel part of a larger professional network. (MN)

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EVALUATION OF THE IMPACT OF *FOCUS ON BASICS* ON ITS READERS

by

Barbara Garner
World Education

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The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
Harvard Graduate School of Education
101 Nichols House, Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138

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Evaluation of the Impact of *Focus on Basics* on Its Readers

Introduction

As part of its multi-pronged effort to connect research and practice in the field of adult basic education, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) launched the quarterly publication *Focus on Basics* in January 1997. The broad goals of the publication are to connect research with practice; to connect teachers with research and research with the reality of the classroom; and, by doing so, to make adult basic education research more relevant to the field. NCSALL staff also hope that the publication helps to build a constituency of critical consumers for educational research.

Focus on Basics is a 24- to 28-page theme-based publication. Each issue contains one or two articles that provide an overview of the theory and research related to the theme. Three or four other articles by practitioners --- often discussions of practitioner research projects --- give examples of how these theories are put into practice. NCSALL research projects are profiled in a column entitled "Focus on Research." As findings from NCSALL research are released, *Focus on Basics* publishes articles that explore these findings and the policy and practice implications they raise. The back page of the publication features bibliographic information on resources related to the theme of the issue.

NCSALL has made a concerted effort to draw upon writers from across the U.S. who represent the range of adult basic education venues and contexts. For each issue, an editorial board of practitioners is assembled. Care has also been taken to ensure that the editorial board represents the geographic and programmatic diversity of the field.

Focus on Basics is mailed in bulk to state directors of adult basic education (ABE) or their designees for local distribution. It is posted on NCSALL's web site and is available by subscription for eight dollars for four issues.

Print-based materials such as *Focus on Basics* are often derided as an ineffective mean of professional development. Yet, NCSALL reasoned, such a limited selection of professional publications is available to the field of adult basic education that a high-quality publication that takes into account the interests of teachers might provide one effective way to disseminate NCSALL research findings and to have an impact upon practice. We also envisioned extending the impact of *Focus on Basics* by encouraging its use as study circle material and as supporting material in trainings. Between February and August of 1999, *Focus on Basics* editor Barbara Garner and Eileen Barry, a consultant who is an experienced adult basic education practitioner and qualitative researcher, conducted an evaluation of the impact of *Focus on Basics*. We share our findings with you here.

Methodology

Subscribers to *Focus on Basics* were contacted by telephone and asked if they would participate in a 15-minute phone interview regarding the impact of the publication. We offered them a one-year free subscription for participating, and assured them that all their comments would be confidential. If they were willing to participate, an appointment time was set and the interview conducted at that time.

We developed and tested three survey instruments: one for teachers, one for program administrators, and one for staff developers. We gathered information about the size of the program in which the teachers and administrators worked, whether they were full or part time workers, how long they had been in the field, and the training they had had for their jobs. We also asked about their most recent professional development activities. Our impact-related questions ranged from whether they shared the publication with others, to whether reading it led to a change in thought or practice.

Sample

We did not attempt to reach a random sample of adult education practitioners. We were interested in the impact of the publication upon people who read it, so we contacted a self-selected group of people who had made the effort to subscribe. We tried to get representation from a large number of states and from a balanced number of practitioner roles: teacher, program administrator, staff developer, and others. The results represent the impact of the publication on those who have chosen to subscribe to it.

Of calls to 112 subscribers, 60 people were contacted and 49 participated in the survey. We were successful in reaching people from a large number of states. Respondents were located in 21 states, Washington DC, and Canada: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, Washington, Washington DC, and Winnepeg.

Twelve teachers participated. The twelve who participated had an average of thirteen years of experience; with a range of five to 25 years. Five held full time jobs; five held part time (one of whom noted that she "pieced together" part time jobs into one full time job), one was retired, and one did not respond to the question. At least six of the teachers had master's degrees in fields related to their jobs.

Thirteen staff developers participated. Some of these practitioners were college professors, some did consulting, others worked for state-funded professional development organizations. They averaged fifteen years in the field, with their experience ranging from five years to more than 35 years. At least five of them had master's degrees in related fields; three had doctorates.

A total of 24 program directors, of whom some also teach, responded. They had an average of fifteen years of experience with two-thirds of the directors having ten or more years of experience. At least ten of them had master's degrees in fields related to their jobs; two were working towards doctorates.

Findings

Sharing

Of the twelve teachers surveyed, ten said they have shared *Focus on Basics* with colleagues, through informal discussion, discussions at staff meetings, and by photocopying articles for others. One of the two who did not share it explained that she is so isolated she has no one with whom to share it; the other has mentioned *Focus on Basics* in general to colleagues but has not talked about specific issues or articles.

Of thirteen staff developers surveyed, twelve have shared it with others and one has not. Staff developers put individual articles in newsletters, distributed articles and the whole issue out in workshops, and shared it with colleagues and graduate students. Particular issues were mentioned as "having legs:" the issue on adult multiple intelligences, the issue on change, the GED issue, and the issue on learner motivation. Staff developers also encouraged program directors to receive the publication, recommend particular articles to directors who were seeking to address specific problems, and referred practitioners to *Focus on Basics* on NCSALL's web site.

Of the program administrators contacted, 20 shared it with staff in different ways; two did not. The ways in which the program administrators shared it include: copying articles for staff, circulating it among staff, putting all issues in a binder in a staff library, purchasing it for all staff, putting articles in their organizations' newsletters, and using it to prompt discussions at staff meetings. Sixteen recalled discussing particular articles or ideas at staff meetings, either to help support directions they want to take or to challenge the direction in which their program is going. One program director organized a study circle on project-based instruction using that issue of *Focus on Basics* as the reading materials. Another director, seeking a switch to a teaching position, reviewed all the back issues in preparation for her job interview.

Reflection

Reflection is the first step on the road to action. All twelve of the teachers surveyed reported that reading *Focus on Basics* caused them to reflect on what they do. "Sometimes," one teacher said, "I think [about] how I could work differently in the classroom: if something would work or if it applies to me."

Sixteen program administrators reported that reading *Focus on Basics* caused them to reflect on how their programs are designed. Some felt

supported in what they are already doing when they read it. For others, it prompted consideration of new practices, such as the use of classroom instruction rather than their current lab set up, using a more structured language approach, or deciding to share power as an administrator. One director considered getting input from students based on an article she read in *Focus on Basics*. Another changed her program's orientation for teachers after reading the *Reading* issue. A program director said she uses *Focus on Basics* all the time "as impetus for constantly re-evaluating what we're doing."

Change In Practice

Six teachers reported that they had changed something they did in class based on something they had read in *Focus on Basics*, four said they had not, and two responded that it was hard to attribute changes to the publication specifically. A number of teachers reported starting teacher research projects based on reading *Focus on Basics*. Of the four who said they had not made changes, two qualified their answers, one remarking that she did not feel she had the power to make changes in her classroom, another noting that she was new to a center and it was too soon to make changes.

Changes in Staff Development Activities

While only three staff developers reported changing their practice as a result of reading *Focus on Basics*, a number mentioned that it "keeps us up to date, informed" and "has been inspirational and uplifting." One staff developer commented that "It makes you want to do your job after reading about actual impact." Staff developers have also distributed photocopies of articles as handouts in workshops they led.

Changes in Program Design

Only three teachers said reading *Focus on Basics* caused them to change their program design. But, of the nine who said it did not, many said it caused them to think about possibilities; others felt that they have no time or latitude to make changes. "It does help me bolster my arguments when I meet with our director," one teacher commented.

Six directors we spoke to made changes in their programs based on reading *Focus on Basics*; fifteen had not. Some of the changes have been radical: One program has redesigned itself from open entry/open exit to enrollment at the beginning of each term. Another added classes and changed its hours. A director who had not taken action yet was considering creating a mission and vision statement. A number of directors commented that reading *Focus on Basics* gave them support for what they are already doing.

Impetus for Seeking New Resources

Each issue of *Focus on Basics* includes a list of web sites and articles that relate to the theme of the issue. Seven teachers out of twelve said they

looked up articles or used the web to find materials listed in *Focus on Basics*; five said they had not, but three of those reported plans to do so. One person joined a study circle group based on reading *Focus on Basics*. Another mentioned that she would like to use the web but was just getting computer access.

Twelve program administrators said they looked up articles or other resources. One person remarked that she looks in *Focus on Basics* first to see what she can put in her newsletter. Sharing information on resources with teachers was also noted.

Eight staff developers have looked up resources. Others noted that having *Focus on Basics* on the web was also a resource: "I have downloaded a whole issue after it was thrown away," one person remarked.

Appreciation of Research

Since one of the goals of *Focus on Basics* is to build a critical constituency for research, we were interested in whether readers feel that their appreciation of research has increased. Eleven teachers said yes, and the twelfth noted that she already had had an appreciation for research before she started receiving the publication. "I wish I knew how to get more involved in that [research]. I would like to do more classroom research and need to know how to do it in a more systematic way," said a respondent. Another noted that she had not known that so much research was being conducted. Others noted that it made them feel like research has relevance to their classrooms.

Seven staff developers felt that their appreciation of research increased because of *Focus on Basics*. Comments pointed to the publication's "reader friendly" style and use of layperson's terms. The publication does a "good job showing how research and practice can be connected." One staff developer explained that reading FOB helped her to understand teacher research and encourage others to engage in it. It has "elevated it in my eyes," commented one respondent.

Twelve program administrators also felt that reading *Focus on Basics* changed their appreciation for research, and nine mentioned that they already had an appreciation for research. "Articles are well grounded" was one of the comments. Another administrator mentioned that "a lot of research tends to be boring but *Focus on Basics* has a way of presenting it in a more applied way."

Larger Professional Network

While we were piloting the survey instruments we heard from a number of people that reading *Focus on Basics* made them feel part of a larger professional network, so we added a question about this to the survey. The response was almost unanimous: regardless of role, all but one respondent felt that it increased their feeling of belonging to a larger professional network. Comments that described this sensation included: "sense of professionalism;" and "gives me a national focus." One respondent noted that *Focus on Basics*

"highlights the difficulties we all face;" and "provides insight into how others are doing things." "[It] gives those of us who get mired down in the day-to-day details a chance to escape to a higher plane of thought," said a program administrator. A professor who works in a school of education felt that it actually connected her to a narrower professional field, adult basic education within the framework of the larger adult education arena.

Discussion

Focus on Basics is one of the few national, teacher-oriented publications in the adult basic education field that strives to connect research and practice. This survey has shown us that the teachers, program administrators, and staff development providers who read it are also using it. They share it with colleagues, by circulating it and by providing it to others in workshops, in staff meetings, and in response to specific questions. They also discuss it with colleagues. So while subscription numbers are not high, --- we are very much focused on expanding distribution --- the publication is reaching many more people than the subscription numbers suggest.

Focus on Basics is sparking reflection. Readers are finding that it confirms their practice as well as challenges it. It provides the basis for discussions that will lead, in time, to change. *Focus on Basics* is provoking change, radical change in some cases: such as a switch from open entry open exit enrollment to a cycle system with a set beginning and end. And where it is not helping to propel change, its' readers often feel the desire for change but lack or perceive themselves as lacking the ability to institute change.

The field of adult basic education is concerned with quality and results. Practitioners look to research to provide the foundation for quality. Many adult basic education practitioners, however, have been suspicious of formal research, have had little access to it, or have had limited understanding of it. This has contributed to a divide, or gap, between research and practice. *Focus on Basics* is helping to narrow the research-to-practice divide by helping readers develop a wider appreciation of research. Respondents emphasized the role the publication has played in their growing understanding of and interest in practitioner research. A number of readers have been motivated to engage in practitioner research after reading *Focus on Basics*, and two readers have submitted articles to *Focus on Basics* based on the work the publication inspired.

Perhaps most important of all the findings is that, after reading *Focus on Basics,* readers identify themselves with a larger professional network. They locate themselves within a national field, an occupation rather than a passing avocation. This growing sense of professionalism is vital to adult basic education if the field is to make the strides it hopes to in the coming decade.